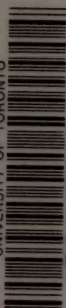


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THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A CLOWN



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To Miss Marion G. Foltz

With the request

of the author,

J. F. Marcossan.

New York, October 14. 1910.

**THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF A CLOWN**



"IT TAKES A WISE MAN TO BE A FOOL."

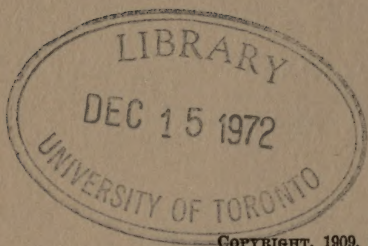
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A CLOWN

AS TOLD TO
ISAAC F. MARCOSSON

ILLUSTRATED



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TO
THE CHILDREN WHO LOVE
THE CLOWNS

A WORD ABOUT JULES

THIS story of Jules Turnour interests me more than I can say. I have known him for more than twenty years; have seen him at very close range in all the shifting movement of a great circus organization, and I have yet to find a man with a cleaner, higher aim. Mr. Marcossou, I think, has admirably brought out the contrast between his whitened and motley face and his patient, serious purpose to make his life helpful. The world has been made better by the presence and work of Jules, and I am glad that at last the real story of his somewhat unusual career is now told.

ALFRED T. RINGLING.

PREFACE

WHEN the article on which this little book is based appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* we were amazed at the response it evoked. It simply proved that all the world loves a clown. In most of the comment and communication, however, there was a question as to the authenticity of the subject. I beg to say that Jules is a real personage and still the nimble producer of many laughs.

It was while writing a series of articles on an entirely different phase of the circus that I first met Jules. I heard of him the moment I stepped into the circus world. So thoroughly had he impressed his personality; so deeply had he become at-

tached to its life, and so profoundly had he gained the respect of its people, that not to have heard of him argued that I was deaf and blind to everything about me. I found him the friend, philosopher, and guide of the nomadic city of tents that rose with the dawn and slipped away into the night. Despite its transiency, there was much permanency of character in its varied inhabitants. No one contributed more to its moral structure than Jules, the clown.

We who live in this breathless era are wont to look upon the circus as a temporary amusement makeshift. It is here to-day and gone to-morrow. Yet behind its spangled, tinsel array and restless movement are real traditions. Why has the circus endured in an age that craves new diversion? Simply because it is basic; because it fills a fundamental need; because it is a staple like wheat. Laughter is one

of the few eternal things; therefore the circus which produces it takes on something of the same quality. More than this, the circus is as much an expression of art as the drama. Like art, it is universal. The clown being a world citizen interprets a world humor in which there is neither border line, race, nor creed. Most of the great humorists have been sad men, and thus the clown, clothed in his right mind, is grave and reflective. Though he wear cap and bells, he has not wanted for recognition among the great. Garrick, Kemble, and Booth have been glad to claim him as fellow-artists. But it is in the heart of the child that he has found his most grateful friend, and in a larger sense all the world is a child when it goes to the circus.

In my work I have had to be, on many occasions, the biographer of the great and the chronicler of much timely achievement.

In all this swift march of people and events I have yet to meet a man whose devotion to the ideals of his art is more sincere than that which has animated Jules Turnour through the long years of his clowning. I have been with him in the tumult of tented travel and watched him in the roofed arena before the multitudes. Always I have found him proud to be a clown. To know him has indeed been a liberal education in character and loyalty.

ISAAC F. MARCOSSON.

New York, January, 1910.

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THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A CLOWN

I

I AM BORN IN A CIRCUS WAGON

I SUPPOSE it was destiny that I should be a clown because I was born in a circus wagon. It happened in this way. My mother had been a première dancer on the French and English stage and had appeared in many of the great Covent Garden and Drury Lane Christmas pantomimes, but she grew stout, which is always fatal to that kind of dancing. She did not want to leave my father, who was also a dancer and general acrobat, so they invested their savings in a small circus.

In those days—it was more than fifty years ago—Europe was alive with small circuses; most of them very modest, but all furnishing a very popular form of amusement. There were few, if any, theaters scattered throughout the country. Only city folk could enjoy the benefits and pleasures of plays. It followed that the great mass of the country people flocked to the circus, and the coming of one of them was an event. Often the circus showed in a large inclosure built for meetings and public entertainments. There was no top to the structure and in case of rain the people either went home or ran the risk of spoiling their clothes for the privilege of remaining. The shows traveled from town to town in wagons, much smaller but not unlike the big red creaking wagons of the modern American circus.

Up to that time the menagerie was not

considered necessary to the circus, but it was good business to have at least one cage with a wild beast in it. My mother's circus had a performing lion who was a sort of patriarch. He was so amiable that he would eat out of the hand of a child and he was so gentle that he had to be prodded into a roar. The circus bill included several acrobatic acts, a juggler, a sleight-of-hand worker, and the faithful lion who was both useful and ornamental. My mother, who was as clever in business as she had been with her toes, managed the show and my father was the principal performer. It was a happy-go-lucky life, this wandering from town to town, in the pleasant sunshine by day and under the stars by night.

During the year so fateful to me our little show had traveled through the south of France and made its way into Spain.

On a clear, hot July Sunday we reached Galicia and camped on the edge of a wood. It was there that I was born. My mother and father cooked, ate, and slept in one of the wagons which was for years the traveling home of the family. My mother always told me that the first thing I saw when my little eyes gazed out of the wagon was old Albro, the French clown, who sat in the sun whitening his face for the afternoon performance. More than once my baby cries mingled with the rude jests he hurled at the audiences. He was often my nurse and he told me wonderful stories of his travels in foreign countries. I toddled about the wagons and often slept under the very hoofs of the horses. When I cried late at night my mother would take me out near the lion's cage and tell me that the old fellow would come out and roar if I did not stop. I never cried during the

performances, but lay in my little bed in the wagon charmed by the music. I was, in truth, a child of the circus.

As I grew older I became a problem. The circus grew larger and my mother was so much occupied with the details of its management that she had little time for me. A nurse with the show was out of the question. So I was sent to Lisbon, where my father had relatives. I remember very little of my early childhood there. The circus scenes are much more vivid. I do recall that my nurse told me many times that I was to be a circus performer when I grew up. That of course pleased me. In the winters, when the little show was packed away and the old lion rented out to a menagerie in Toulon, my father and mother came to see me. On my fifth birthday I got my first lesson in the alphabet. Instead of teaching me the word cat,

the old nurse taught me how to spell lion. You see I knew all about lions and very little about cats.

My parents were very thrifty. It is the French habit. It is, or was, part of the old unwritten French circus law, that as soon as a child was strong enough to stand on his hands he must be put out to work. Likewise it is a tradition that the name of a family in a circus must be carried on by the children and by their children's children. It followed that when I was six years old my father came one January day and took me to London. On the way there he told me that the time had come when I should begin my career. I was only six, but to this day I recall my father's words.

When we got to London it was wet and cold and I was afraid. I hardly knew my father, we had been separated so long. We went to a small hotel much frequented by

circus and theatrical people. My father was known to most of them, and more than one big broad-shouldered man clapped me on the shoulder so hard that it hurt. In those days the circus people were rude and a hard lot, and they thought I was as tough as they were.

The very night that we reached London a brawny, red-faced man came to see my father at the hotel. I recall that he was addressed as "Mr. Conrad." I had a sort of shiver when he came into the room. It was curious, too, how he should have affected me, for he was destined to play a very important part in my life. He and my father talked a long time. Every once in a while I heard my name mentioned. Finally the man came over to me, picked me up in one hand (he was a giant in strength), and flung me up in the air. He caught me easily and then let me slide

to the floor. After he left my father said:

“Jules, henceforth you are to live with that man. He is to be your father and your teacher. Be a good boy.”

Then he told me that I had been apprenticed to the Conrads, who were a famous acrobatic family. The following day my father took me to another hotel where the Conrads were living, for they were performing in the Hippodrome, and he went back to Spain to join my mother. I had made a start in the big business of life and I felt very lonesome.

Perhaps I had better explain right here just what being apprenticed to an acrobatic “family” means. The same thing has gone on in Europe for a hundred years and will go on as long as acrobats keep up their work. Every great group of performers that you see in the circus or elsewhere, no

matter if they perform on the flying trapeze, tumble, or ride on bicycles or on horseback, is called a "family." They may be known as the Sensational Sellos or the Marvelous Revellis. Now the interesting thing about it is that they are not real families at all. They develop into groups simply because they take in young apprentices, train and develop them, and make them part of their troupes. Six or seven real families may be represented in one circus "family."

The head of the "family" is always the biggest man of the lot. In circus or acrobatic speech he is known as the "understander," because literally he stands at the bottom of the act, as for example in the human pyramid, and holds up all the rest. He must be broad, strong, and powerful in every way. He makes all the contracts, receives all moneys, and is the general manager of the combination. The Conrads

were a very well-known "family" and much in demand for circuses all over the Continent and England. Shortly after I became a member of the Conrads the London engagement ended and we went to the famous Circus Rentz in Berlin.

I was given to understand at the start that Mr. Conrad was my boss in all things. He was to provide me with food and clothes and shelter. He controlled my time and my actions day and night. He was not long in beginning my training. We practiced in the rooms of the hotels or boarding houses where we stopped or in the arenas in the morning before the performance began.

The Conrads were what is known as "carpet gymnasts," which means that they worked on the ground and not in the air. It was decided that I should begin as a contortionist because they needed one in a



"EVERY STEP IN THE MAKING OF A CLOWN IS HARD WORK."

new act they were preparing. I began by practicing what is known in the profession as posturing. This consists of bending back and forth. In order to be a good contortionist you must be a good "bender," that is, bend so close that the two extremes of your body meet. While many people may be born supple, it does not follow that they can become good contortionists, save by long and constant training. Every day one of the Conrads took me by the arms and another took me by the feet and bent me back and forth. It was very hard and painful and often I cried. Then one of my teachers would jeer at me and say:

"Only babies cry. Be a man."

Sometimes I thought I should die from weariness and ache. But as I grew more supple and could bend more closely I began to take a pride in my work. The Conrads encouraged this pride and relented far

enough to say a kind word when I showed particular signs of progress.

By the time I was eight years of age I was considered a good contortionist. Long before that time I had appeared in public. I was first used as a sort of human baseball in family acts. I was tossed from shoulder to shoulder. At other times I became a spinning wheel. One of the Conrads would lie on his back, lift me to the soles of his feet, and then whirl me around. At first it made me dizzy, but I came to like it because the people applauded. It is easy to succumb to the flattery of the crowd and to love the music of clapping hands. You never get enough of it in the circus business.

In addition to my training as contortionist I was being trained as gymnast. I was taught the forward somersault first. I wore a belt with a ring on each side.

Stout cords were passed through these rings. With a Conrad on each side holding the cords which acted as an axis I was whirled around. Soon I was able to turn without their help. Then I learned the back somersault in the same way. This constant work hardened my muscles and I became like steel. All the while we were traveling over Europe, visiting the circuses of the great capitals. But I saw little of the cities or their life. It was work or training all day and half the night and then to bed, for the acrobat must have his rest and lots of sleep.

My first public appearance alone followed soon after I became a skilled contortionist. I was heralded as a "Child Wonder" and I did what was known as "The Demon Act." I wore red tights, reddened my face, wore a little tail, and looked like a real little devil. I shall never

forget my initial appearance. It was in a huge London music hall. When I came out everybody applauded because I must have been a fearful sight. Every seat seemed to be filled, the band played, and it was a wonderful feeling. I forgot, for the moment, all the hardship and traveling I had endured; the cold, the hunger, and the separation from my parents. All that I realized was that a great, new, animated world was spread before me and that all eyes were upon me. My act was simple contortion work, but the effective red costume seemed to make a hit and I was recalled several times. Henceforth I did this act twice a day for a year. When I got through each time I had to change my clothes, put on flesh-colored tights, and do my share of work with the whole Conrad family.

My apprenticeship to the Conrads lasted

ten years, the original term of the indenture. During that time I received no pay. I don't think that in all that period I had as much as a pound to spend on myself. Meanwhile the Conrads had received good money for my appearance, especially for the "Demon Act." But I must say I learned a lot from them despite the fact that they were hard taskmasters.

On the day I was sixteen years of age my slavery ended. The contract with the Conrads was up and I was free. The Conrads wanted me to stay with them, but I had too many scars on my back, too vivid a memory of cold, half-fed nights and long days of relentless practicing. I wanted to go out in the world for myself, and I went.

At the Circus Francisco in Paris I met a young apprentice, a fine young German lad. We had sympathized with each other,

and, boy-like, had made a sort of pact that as soon as we got out of bondage we would form a team. "Who knows," I had said, "some day we may have a 'family' of our own." His term of apprenticeship ended with mine; I had his address, so we met in London. He was a good contortionist, having gone through the same rigorous training that I had, and we had little trouble in getting an engagement together. At one time we had four engagements at the same time in London. We had to go from music hall to music hall in cabs, and often we did not have time to change clothes. We were making twenty pounds a week apiece, which is pretty good money for boys barely seventeen. I sent most of my money home to my mother. The circus had failed and she was living in Paris. My father had died in the meantime. You may wonder perhaps how a boy of my tender years was

able to take care of himself. But if my years were tender, my back and muscles were hard. Life, too, was hard. I had been raised in a stern school, and it made for independence.

After a year of freedom I became ill. One day I collapsed during my contortion act. I went to a hospital and the doctor told me that I could not work for years. I could hardly believe it, but he said that I had worked so hard that I had strained myself. To make this unhappy chapter of my life short, I was in and out of a hospital for three years.

When I came out I felt weak, but the first thing I did was to try some of my old contortion tricks. But there was a great wrench in my back and a sharp pain shot all through my body. The cold sweat broke out all over me. I tried again, and with the same result. Then I realized what had

happened. I had become stiff, and my days as contortionist were over. I was barely twenty years old, and yet I had lived a whole lifetime of work and denial. What was I to do?



“ LAUGHTER LOOSENS THE FETTERS OF THE BRAIN.”

II

I BECAME A CLOWN

I FOUND that I could still do some acrobatic tricks like simple flip-flaps. You can never possibly realize the feeling of consolation that came to me when I landed on my feet after the first experimental turn, for, with that landing, I realized that I still had a means of earning a livelihood. It was like a man who suddenly found an arm useful that had been considered helpless. I had been a good balancer in my contortion days, and this was also an asset. So I joined a troupe known as "Jackley's Wonders," which started for a tour of Northern Africa with Brachini's circus.

But my joy over finding the relic of my gymnastic power was short-lived. Even the most ordinary acrobatic work began to tell on me. Every night when the circus day was ended, I suffered the most intense pains. My back became weak. I was in despair.

One day the ringmaster, to whom I had told my physical troubles, said to me:

“Jules, you are a good mimic. Why don't you try clowning?”

It struck me as a very good idea. I had always been interested in clowns. Their drolleries and fooling had won my child heart, and I could never forget those early kindnesses of the old clown Albro, my first nurse, who was with my mother's circus. Often during the harsh days of my apprenticeship I would steal away after training and watch the clowns at work or play.

They told me stories, but, to my great surprise, they were never funny stories, and I now recall my first sense of surprise over finding the clowns such serious, sober men when they were away from the circus. I had watched them very carefully, and I had an instinct that I was going to succeed as one of them.

To be a good clown, even then, a man had to be a pretty good acrobat, because in his clowning he was called upon to do many arduous physical things. The clowns in those days were what was known as "talking" clowns. They talked as they worked. The circuses were much smaller than now, and it was not difficult to get and hold the interest and attention of the people. One of the clowns' favorite occupations was to guy the ringmaster. He would engage him in conversation something like this:

"I hear you are a great traveler."

“ Yes,” the ringmaster would reply with great dignity.

“ Ever been to Rome? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Been to Paris? ”

“ Yes.”

Then the clown would ask if he had been to various other cities, to which the ringmaster would keep on making the reply “ Yes.” Then the clown would glibly ask:

“ Ever been to jail? ”

† Whereupon the ringmaster would pretend to fall into the trap and say “ Yes,” at which the crowd roared with laughter. This may seem to be rude humor to you, but the circus crowds in the foreign provinces were composed of rude people of the middle and lower classes, and they thought † this kind of horse-play was great fun.

My first appearance as clown is a very vivid recollection. It was in the circus at

Oran, in North Africa. I had, in my day, done many hazardous acrobatic feats and it was a daily matter for me to risk my neck in some kind of performance. I could do it, too, without turning a hair. But when I came out in my white face before a great crowd I was nervous. I had a good make-up, however, and the people laughed as soon as they saw me. Laughter has a peculiar effect. If it ripples out as soon as you appear, you may be sure that you are succeeding, because if the people do not think you even look funny, they will not laugh. My nervousness in clowning soon wore off.

As I came to study clowning I found that it was a serious and difficult business. Every step in the making of a clown or the manufacture of his "business" is hard work. To produce laughs you must make a serious effort. You may have noticed that

nearly every clown makes a practice of falling down in various absurd and ridiculous ways. Even this business of making a fall requires the most elaborate kind of preparation. It may look very easy to take a tumble in the sawdust, but I assure you it is only done after long practice. Every step of it must be rehearsed. Unless the funny fall is natural, it fails utterly.

The tall, peaked hat was a great aid to the clown in my early days of clowning. I do not know the origin of it, save that it probably descended from the original fool's cap. I used to come out with seven of these peaked hats piled up on my head. Then I would take them off, throw them up in the air, one by one, and catch them on my head. This always made a great hit. In those days the circus, being small, only had one clown, and he had to do a good deal of work.

To be a successful clown you had also to be a good pantomimist, because all clowning is really based on the pantomime. This enabled the clown to get an engagement on the variety stage during the winter and closed circus season.

Meanwhile I had been traveling all over Europe, first with one circus and then another. My work as clown developed. Of course, in passing from one country to the other I picked up the different Continental languages. This was highly important, because I had often to carry on a sort of running conversation with the spectators.

Like every other circus performer I had many escapes from death. My body and arms were soon covered with scars, each one a souvenir of some accident. At the Circus Cliniselli in Berlin I was knocked down by a horse, which walked on my face. One hoof laid my cheek open. The crowd

thought it was part of the show, and laughed, while I suffered tortures, not knowing what the animal would do next.

At St. Petersburg I was doing a clown leaping act over a row of horses, when the springboard slipped and I landed on my head. I was taken out for dead, but in a few days I was all right again and back at my work.

It was while I was performing at the Cirque d'Eté in Paris that I witnessed a sight that made a profound impression on me. In the circus was a dashing rider named M. Prince. He was a great favorite and his appearance was always greeted by tremendous applause. He did a somersault on horseback. One day he slipped, fell on his head, and lay still. An attendant ran forward, covered him with a blanket, and carried him off. At that moment the ring-master took off his hat and announced:

“It is nothing, ladies and gentlemen; a very slight accident. M. Prince begs the public will excuse him.”

Then we clowns leaped into the arena and made merry, and the circus went on. The truth of the matter was that M. Prince's neck had been broken by the fall and that he had died instantly. So swift and sure is the circus man's desire not to divert the interest of the crowd that there was absolutely no hint of the tragedy that had happened before the very eyes of everybody.

About this time I joined what was called the Schumann Combination, a half circus and half variety show. We had acrobats, jugglers, singers, dancers, a clown, and a marvelous sword swallower named Maldini. He was the greatest artist of his kind I ever saw. He could run a bayonet and part of a gun-barrel down his throat. He was

very keen and resourceful, too, as you shall see.

We went on an elaborate tour, and reached Mexico. There we played many small towns. It was hard traveling, for Mexico was a rude country with few cities. We had to journey by donkey and by stage; the roads were bad and the land infested with brigands. All the men in our troupe were heavily armed.

One night we stopped at a small inn and took a much-needed rest. Before we departed the next morning the innkeeper warned us about the danger of crossing a certain narrow mountain road. The innkeeper said that we were very liable to be held up by brigands.

“But,” he added, “if a man appears at the top of the cañon and waves his hat at you, you are safe.”

Being a sword swallower, Maldini was



“ THE TALL PEAKED HAT WAS A GREAT AID TO CLOWNING.”

the nearest thing to a real soldier or fighting man that we had, so, by unanimous vote, he was placed in command of the expedition. As we approached the narrow pass we saw men concealed in the bushes. Maldini halted us, gave orders to prepare our weapons in a loud voice, and then added:

“Fire fast and die bravely.”

Then he stepped forward and pulled from a sheath one of the huge swords that he used in his sword-swallowing act. After testing its keenness by running the blade over his finger, he struck a fine dramatic pose, and rammed the sword down his throat again and again. It was a curious and unforgettable picture; the sword swallowed out on that rocky ledge in the early morning light, with the great mountains all around. He was literally swallowing for dear life.

It was a wild country, and the people were very superstitious. They had never seen a sword swallower before. Therefore, as Maldini did his act out in the open we could hear the brigands fairly gasping in wonderment and awe. In a few moments one of them arose, waved his hat with trembling hand, and we passed through the danger zone safely. The sword-swallowing act had probably saved our lives, and we showered praise and congratulation upon Maldini. This incident determined my future course. I had found my work hard enough, but I did not want physical hardship increased by outside menace. I had all the perils I wanted in my work, so I decided to leave at the very first opportunity. In those days we had no written contracts, and the performers could leave whenever they got ready.

We traveled through Mexico and some

of the Central American countries. Finally we reached the Pacific coast. The Combination was headed for South America and wanted me to go along, but I declined. I was in the New World, and I wanted to see something of it. Besides, my mother had come to New York to live. She had married for the second time, her new husband being a manufacturer of fireworks.

I took the first boat for San Francisco. It gave me a sort of thrill to step ashore there, for the United States had always beckoned to me. I felt that there could be no hardship here. The land was smiling and the sky was as blue as Italy's.

I crossed the continent to New York and went straight to my mother's. She lived in a little flat on Third Avenue. You must remember that I had not seen her for

nineteen years. Almost tremblingly I mounted the steps and rang the bell at her door. It seemed an age before the knob turned and the door opened. In the doorway I saw a stout woman, who stared at me curiously. I saw that she did not recognize me.

"Who are you and what do you want?" she asked.

"Don't you know me?" I asked.

The woman looked steadily at me, and said slowly:

"No."

It gave me a deep wrench.

"I am your boy Jules," I said. She gave a cry and fell on my neck. Then she almost carried me into the room and made me sit on her lap. She caressed my face, and said:

"You have changed a great deal. Where is your soft, silky hair that you

had as a boy, and what has become of your beautiful complexion?"

Sadly enough my circus life had played havoc with whatever tenderness and softness I once had in my face. The Red Rattle, as the paint I had used in the Demon Act is called, had left marks on my face. Besides, pain and hardship had put their indelible impress in lines and wrinkles. The close-fitting caps that I had to wear as clown had made my hair thin and coarse.

But I was glad to be back even in the pretense of a home. I inquired eagerly of my sisters. One of them, Millie, had become a great balancing trapeze artist, and was with the Forepaugh circus. Another sister, Jennie, was a noted bareback rider with the Sells show; my brother Tom had developed into a famous acrobat and pantomimist, and was with the Hanlons. I felt proud of all of them. They had done

honor and dignity to the family's circus name, and maintained its best traditions. I alone felt that it was up to me to do something great in my line.

I wanted to remain near my mother for a little while, so I went on as juggler at a variety show on the Bowery, which was then the most famous amusement highway in New York. But the call of the circus was always in my ears. When once you have tasted of its sensations they never die. I played the part of a Spanish clown in a circus at Havana, and then returned to the United States, this time to stay.

III

I JOIN THE TENTED CIRCUS

DURING all these years that I had spent clowning in various lands, that peculiarly American institution, the tented circus, had been rapidly developing. The first circus to show under a "canvas top" had unfolded its wonders in New England as far back as 1826. Previous to that time the circuses had showed in frame buildings, theaters, or in hotel yards behind canvas walls under the sky. The first shows had no menageries. When the showmen did begin to acquire animals from the sea captains who brought them to America in a spirit of speculation, the menagerie was a separate and distinct institution. The ani-

mals had a strong drawing power, and were only exhibited in the daytime. This enabled the showmen to attract people on Sunday. It was not until 1851 that the circus and the menagerie were exhibited at the same time for one price of admission.

Strange as it may seem to you who are accustomed to seeing elephants, the first one brought to this country produced a profound sensation. I have heard the old showmen talk of it very often. It was not attached to a circus, but was exhibited in barns during the day. At night it was taken from town to town, swathed in blankets, so curious country people could not get a free glimpse of it. Sadly enough, this elephant was shot by some miscreant, who wanted to see if a bullet would pierce his thick hide.

In Europe we had heard various kinds of reports about the American circus from

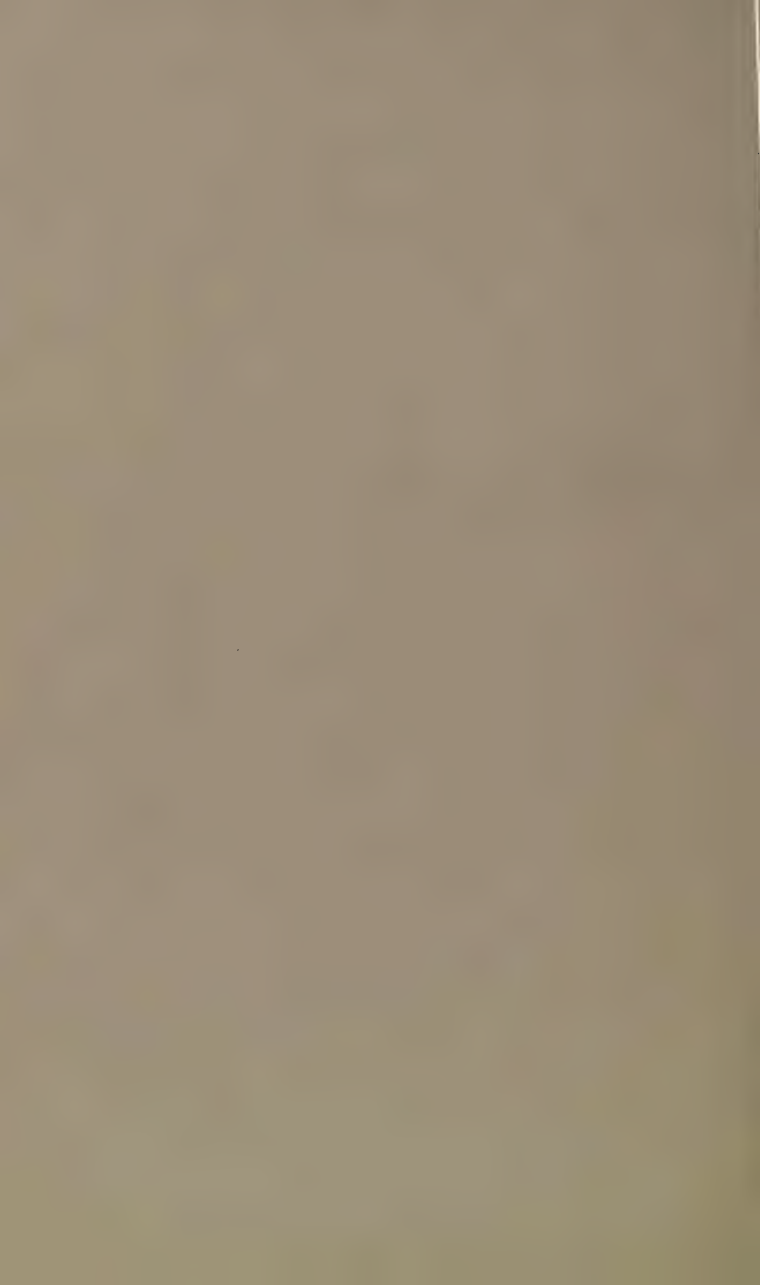
performers who had gone over. Some seemed incredible. It was said that the shows in this country had hundreds of horses and as many attendants. This seemed so huge alongside our smaller Continental circuses that I refused to believe it. But when I did come over and saw an American circus in all its glory I realized that half of the truth about it had not been told. When I came back from Havana the old circus kings were coming into their own. W. C. Coup, probably the father of the modern traveling circus, had the "United Monster Shows" out. He lured P. T. Barnum from the museum business to the circus game, and they formed what was undoubtedly the first great combination of showmen. "Yankee" Robinson, who had been a circus autocrat as far back as the sixties, the Sells Brothers, Adam Forepaugh, the Mabies, Dan Costello, and John Robinson,

all had shows on the road, and were getting bigger and stronger all the time. It was about that time that the Ringling Brothers were having their first circus thrills, and were laying the foundation of a knowledge and experience that have made them leaders of their world to-day.

All the circuses then were wagon shows. They traveled from town to town in wagons. The performers went ahead to the hotel in 'buses or snatched what sleep they could in specially built vans. The start for the next town was usually made about three o'clock in the morning. No "run" from town to town was more than twenty miles, and more often it was considerably less. At the head of the cavalcade rode the leader, on horseback, with a lantern. Torches flickered from most of the wagons, and cast big shadows. The procession of creaking vehicles, neighing horses, and



“ TO PRODUCE LAUGHS YOU MUST MAKE A SERIOUS EFFORT.”



sometimes roaring beasts was an odd picture as it wound through the night. Many of the drivers slept on their seats. The elephant always walked majestically, with a sleepy groom alongside. The route was indicated by flaming torches left at points where the roads turned. Sometimes these torches went out, and the show got lost. More than once a farmer was rudely aroused from his slumbers, and nearly lost his wits when he poked his head out of his window and saw the black bulk of an elephant in his front yard. It was, indeed, the picturesque day of the circus.

My first engagement was with the Burr Robbins circus, which was a big wagon show. The night traveling in the wagons was new to me, and at first strange. But I got to like it very much. It was a great relief to lie in the wagons, out under the stars, and feel the sweet breath of the

country. Often the nights were so still that the only sounds were the creaking of the wagons, and occasionally the words, "Mile up," that the elephant driver always used to urge on his patient, plodding beast.

The circus arrangement then was much different from now. Then the whole outfit halted outside the town, which was never reached until after daylight. The canvas men would hurry to the "lot" to put up the tents while we remained behind to spruce up for the parade. Gay flags were hoisted over the dusty wagons; the tired and sleepy performers turned out of tousled beds to put on the finery of the Orient. A gorgeous howdah was placed on the elephant's back, and a dark-eyed beauty, usually from some eastern city, was hoisted aloft to ride in state, and to be the envy and admiration of every village maiden. No matter how long, wet, or

dusty had been our journey from the last town, everybody, man and beast, always braced up for the parade. Of course, by this time, we were surrounded by a crowd of gaping countrymen. Often the triumphant parade of the town was made on empty stomachs, for there was to be no let-up until the people of the community had had every bit of "free doing" that the circus could supply. The clowns always drove mules in the parade. When the parade reached the grounds, the performers changed clothes, hastened back to the village hotel, and ate heartily. If there was time, we snatched a few hours of sleep. But sleep and the circus man are strangers during the season. Ask any circus man when he sleeps, and he will say, "In the winter time."

Then, as now and always, the clown was a very important part of the circus. You

could hear the people all up and down the village streets asking: "Where are the clowns?" and when we hove into sight there would be a clapping of hands and the exchange of jests and words. During that first engagement with the Burr Robbins show I was what was called a "talking and knockabout clown." I have had many odd experiences, but none more memorable than my first appearance under canvas in America. I felt as if I had been transported to a different show world and was moving and breathing under a sea of canvas. The arena was much bigger than those of the European circuses, and I found that you had to strain every effort to be seen and heard and appreciated.

I found, among other things, that the average American circus-goer was not so responsive to the clown as the European frequenter of the arena. One reason for

this is that the average American, even in the smaller towns, has more diversions than his foreign cousin. Besides, Europe had seen many generations of clowns, and had witnessed the whole evolution of his art. The American had to be educated up to him.

I stayed with the Robbins show for a number of years. I found the wagon life very alluring. There was an odd sort of democracy among the circus people. I found various countrymen of mine, for the average circus performer is a great nomad. In those days there was fierce and costly rivalry between circuses. It often led to open combat. I have heard that on one occasion one showman burned up a bridge in order to keep a competitor from reaching the next town. Often there was hostility on the part of the natives. The circus man then had to be a fighter in self-

defense. The phrase "Hey, Rube!" had been born. This has been, for many years, the battle-cry of the showmen. It is the call to arms and for help, and I have heard it ring out on dark nights, and the next moment found myself in the center of a struggling, fighting mob.

When I joined out with the Robbins show, however, some of the costly competition of the fighting kind had subsided, although the circus business was fraught with much hardship. Fires, cyclones, and wrecks were the chief dangers. The menagerie then was exhibited in the tent where the big show was given. In case of fire, the animals often got loose. Once, when I was out on the track, I was horrified to see a leopard that had escaped from his cage. He crouched in the sawdust. A troupe of bronchos was in the ring. The wild beast hesitated a moment, then sprang through

the air, and alighted on the back of one of the horses. The animal was stiff with fear. Suddenly I heard a commotion in the seats, and a tipsy countryman made his way to the ring. Before any of the people could move, he had seized a whip and begun lashing the leopard. He was big and strong, and he rained blows on the animal. Soon it began to whimper and before long was groveling in the sawdust, where it was taken in charge by the trainer, who had arrived by this time.

It did not take me long to find out that to be a successful clown in America you had to make local hits, just the way comedians did on the stage. The tents were not nearly so large as they are now and you could talk to your audience and be readily understood. Accordingly, I made haste, as soon as I reached a town, to get a local newspaper, find out what was going on, and

then I made a reference to it in my clowning. It never failed to please the spectators.

I was very much impressed with the United States, for we were traveling all the time. Down South I was much interested in the negroes who flocked to the circus. They would spend their last cent to get in. They were very superstitious, and when we did sleight-of-hand tricks or fancy falls, they stared with big eyes. Some even got scared and left the tent.

The negro lived in deadly fear of the escape of the wild animals. One of the favorite jokes of the advance brigade of the circus, and by this is meant the men who go ahead and do the billing, was to tell the negroes that a den of lions and tigers had escaped, and were prowling through the country. However, this gave the negro a good excuse to avoid going in the woods to



“BEHIND THE JESTS OF THE CLOWN IS THE SEAR OF
SORROW.”

cut timber, and the negro has always delighted in a pretense that postpones manual labor for him as long as possible.

Our work was not without its diversion. The desire of the average boy to join the circus is, of course, universal, but in the young countryman this desire seems greater. Many of them wanted to become "actors," as they called the acrobats. This caused us to fix up a scheme by which we sold the ambitious youngsters a liniment to make them limber. It was made from cheap grease, and was sold more for a joke than anything else. There were always many young men who wanted to be clowns. They, too, bought the grease, which was supposed to have every known physical power.

It was a clean, free life in which the hardships were soon forgotten.

IV

I TELL ABOUT CLOWN TRICKS

THAT was the great clown era in America. Clowning reached a golden age which passed away, never to return again. You may not think so, but we clowns have as much pride in our profession as the most finished Shakespearian actor has in his. It thrills me now to think of the giants of those days, at whose feet I worshiped, and from whose art I drew inspiration. They were all white-faced clowns, but the drollest fun-makers the world ever saw.

The greatest clown America ever saw was Dan Rice. His very name brings back

memories of notable sawdust triumphs. He began by running a puppet show in Reading, Pa. Then he had a trained pig. With this he took up clowning. He was a wonderful rider and was equaled in daring by one man only, and that man was James Robinson, perhaps the most marvelous equestrian that the United States has yet produced. Dan was a real character in and out of the ring. At one time he had what was known in those days as a "river show." He was a good negro minstrel, and took part in the performance. It was given in a "Palace Boat," fitted up as an opera house. It was towed by a big tug, in which the performers ate and slept. Many of the circuses traveled in this way, making fast at the levees each day to give their performances. They were very popular up and down the Mississippi. Rice could do everything that went to amuse the circus

crowd. At one time he earned \$1,000 a week, and for one season Adam Forepaugh paid him a salary of \$27,000. He rose to great affluence, for at one time he owned the Walnut Street Theater in Philadelphia. He had a big tent circus on the road, too. He was of a generous and noble nature; his courage was Spartan, and he was greatly beloved. He would face an angry crowd without flinching, and his name was a household word for young and old. Yet he died in poverty, in a little house on Twenty-third Street in New York. With him perished part of our art.

A close rival to Dan Rice was George L. Fox, who was called the "Grimaldi of America." Grimaldi was the great English clown. With Fox the art of pantomime reached its greatest perfection in this country. He was the original "Humpty Dumpty," and played this part nearly two

thousand times in New York alone. His drollery was irresistible, and he counted among his admirers the Booths and all the other great tragedians of the day.

Then there was "Daddy" Rice, who was no kin to Dan, and such great clowns as Joe Pentland, Johnny Patterson, Billy Walleth, Dan Gardner, John Gossin, Charles Seeley, John Lalow, Billy Burke, father of Billie Burke the actress, "Whimsical" Walker, and last, but not least, Al Miaco, who is still traveling with us. He was a real king's jester, and wore cap and bells. He knows more lines of Shakespeare than most students, and to-day he reads Ben Jonson and Byron under the tent flaps, while waiting for his turn. He is one of the few survivals of the good old days, for he was, and still is, a real artist. In pantomime he is to-day unexcelled. Miaco is

nearly seventy, yet he can twist his foot around his neck with the ease and agility of a youngster. With all his wealth of learning and his remarkable knowledge of books, he is a white-faced clown; he makes grimaces at the people every day, and he is glad he is doing it.

The great clowns of that day were also great comedians. If you had put them on the stage of regular theaters—"hall shows," as we call them—they would have succeeded, simply because they knew how to make fun in a simple, natural way. Transplant a stage comedian to the circus, and the chances are that he will fail. He creates a fun that is artificial.

It makes me laugh now to think of the successful clown tricks of those old days. One of the best known was called the "Peter Jenkins Act," so named because a clown named Peter Jenkins first did it.

The ringmaster and the clown came into the ring and faced the crowd. The former then made this announcement:

“Ladies and gentlemen: I have the great pleasure to announce the appearance of Mademoiselle La Blanche, the world’s most daring and renowned equestrienne, in her marvelous and sensational bareback act as performed before all the crowned heads of Europe.”

A magnificent horse was led in by a groom. He was always a superb animal, a real leader of the “resin back” herd. The horses used for bareback riding are called “resin backs,” because you spread resin on their backs in order to hold the rider’s feet firmly. After the horse had pranced around the ring several times a commotion was heard in the “pad room,” the tent where the trappings are put on the horses. It is just outside the main tent. An attendant rushed

in and whispered something in the ring-master's ear. He seemed much shocked, and then, with some hesitation, proceeded to make the following statement:

"I am very sorry, ladies and gentlemen, to be obliged to announce that Mademoiselle La Blanche has been kicked by a horse on her way to the arena, and is so badly hurt that she is unable to appear."

Of course a murmur of disappointment always ran around through the crowd. A moment later a seedily dressed man arose from a seat among the spectators. He seemed to be partially under the influence of liquor. He shouted:

"This show is a fake. I came here to see that lady ride, and I won't be humbugged."

With this, he started for the ring, reeling as he made his precarious way down the blue seats. At the same time he carried on

a running conversation with the ringmaster. Everybody in the big tent became interested in the little drama that developed, for they thought it was the real thing.

As the drunken man crossed the hippodrome track, and neared the ringmaster, he again upbraided him. Then the ringmaster said:

“You seem to be so smart, I suppose you think *you* can ride.” The horse had remained in the ring all the while.

“You bet I can,” replied the stranger, and started for the horse.

The ringmaster tried to restrain him, saying:

“That horse is dangerous. I warn you that you will be hurt.”

But the man ignored the warning. He took off his coat, still giving every appearance of intoxication. Then he laboriously climbed on the back of the horse. The

crowd watched the performance with growing intensity. Many stood on their seats; all thought some accident would ensue. Nearly every person who goes to a circus expects something to happen that is not down on the bills. They want the lion tamer to be bitten by a fierce beast, or to see an acrobat fall to the ground. I suppose it is human nature.

At any rate, the drunken man finally got on the horse, pulled a bottle from his pocket, took a farewell swig, and then lurched forward as if he only maintained his position with the greatest effort. Meanwhile the horse had started. As he trotted the man's clothes began to fall away from him. In a moment he stood revealed, clad in tights and spangles, and a noble and commanding figure. The ringmaster's whip cracked, the horse began to gallop and lo, the erstwhile drunkard proved him-

self to be a graceful and accomplished rider. Then the crowd saw that it had been tricked, but it was so well done that it invariably burst into applause, and the act became a great success. It took a good clown to do this, because he had to be, first of all, a fine bareback rider. I was the second clown in this many times. It was my job to play with the horse while the ringmaster and the rider were having their conversation.

There was still another very successful clown trick then. It was called the "January Act." From the beginning of the American circus, the mule driven by the clown has been called "January." I never knew just why or how he got this peculiar name, save that the animal looked like the dead of winter, and always got his tail tied up in the reins. The trick was this:

The clown drove into the ring in a red cart drawn by the mule. He drew up with a clatter, saying:

“Whoa, January!”

The magic in this very exclamation was amazing. No matter where spoken, in town or in country, before great and small, it always drew tumultuous applause. After his noisy entrance the clown got into an argument with the ringmaster, who had a fine horse at his side. The clown wanted to make a trade, which was agreed upon, but no sooner did the ringmaster try to move the mule than the animal became balky, and would not budge. Meanwhile the clown drove off in triumph with his horse. The ringmaster, failing to move the mule, called to the clown to come back, but the funny man treated his plea with contempt, while the crowd roared with laughter. The ringmaster, in a last entreaty,



“TO BE A SUCCESSFUL CLOWN YOU HAD ALSO TO BE A
GOOD PANTOMIMIST.”

yelled that the clown could have a cash bonus if he would only take his mule away. This, of course, brought the clown back. In a moment old January was hitched up to the clown wagon, and the clown drove off, waving his money and saying:

“It’s easy when you know how.”

This always caught the crowd, for everybody is interested in a horse trade, and especially a trade in which one of the parties gets much the worst of the deal.

In 1889 I went with the Ringling circus, and I have been with it ever since. It was their last year as a wagon show, for the next year it became a railroad show, and went from town to town on trains. Somehow I did not like the change at first. I had become so accustomed to the wagon traveling at night, to the wild, free, clean abandon of the life, that I did not fancy the idea of sleeping on a stuffy train, with

smoke and cinders to bother me. Many of the other circus people felt the same way about it. The wagon life may have been hard traveling, but it was in the open. God's air and sunshine were about you always, and although it rained and blew sometimes, the discomfort was not for long. It kept everybody sound and healthy. Many a millionaire would envy the appetites and health we enjoyed. And yet, in a way, our life was one of more or less constant hazard.

There was one big satisfaction about the change to the railroad shows. The circus remained under canvas. Strange as it may seem to an outsider, we can work better under canvas than any other place. This is true all up and down the circus line, from the highest priced "kinker," as the performers are called, down to the cheapest "rough neck," as the canvas men are

known. They would rather get soaked to the skin under the "big canvas top" out on a North Dakota prairie than be dry under the roof of Madison Square Garden in New York City.

Of course the circus had been getting bigger all the time. Originally it was a one-ring affair. But the competition in the show business stimulated the various showmen to get new and greater attractions. The one-ring show became a two-ring show, and this in turn became the "monster three-ring aggregation of mastodonic amusement creations," such as is now billed throughout the length and breadth of the land.

As the circus grew bigger, the talking clown ceased to exist. It was only natural that this end of his work should be eliminated. The tents became so large, the arena area so extended, that it was with dif-

ficulty that anyone could be heard in the seats. Besides, so many things were going on at the same time that the clown had to perform with his hands and legs in order to attract any attention at all.

With all the innovations that have come to the aid of the modern circus, such monstrosities as "the dip of death" in a somersaulting automobile, and various other freakish inventions calculated to divert the mind and thrill the young, the clown remains, and always will remain, the really picturesque and permanent feature of the circus business. Like the brook in the poem that the English poet wrote about, he shall go on forever.

But the clown has had to keep pace with the development of the circus. The average person who watches a group of clowns disporting themselves in the ring, and is amused at their grotesque antics, may think

it is silly and easy work. Let him try it. and he will soon find out what hard work it is, and what careful thought is necessary for each act. Every act that is done must be carefully rehearsed. I have practiced on a trick fall for a whole month.

You may have noticed that clowns travel in pairs and trios. This is due to the fact that every clown act, no matter how ludicrous, or how simple, must tell a story. It is really a small comedy or a slight drama. We must not only have action, but something to suggest an incident or a series of incidents. If the clowns, for example, wear soldier uniforms, their act must give a hint of a camp, a battlefield, or some other definite martial picture. It may be hugely grotesque, but it must be a concrete picture just the same.

Like everything else in this busy world, clowning must be timely. We play on

vogues. It may be Salome, or The Merry Widow, or Roosevelt's trip to Africa, or the airship. The good clown must make his act a perfect piece of mimicry. This is the first and foremost requirement. This is why so many good clowns are such fine pantomimists. We must, in short, first see ourselves as others see us.

Many people wonder why we keep the white make-up. This is the traditional clown face, and has been so for many generations of clowns. Both the costume and the face have undergone little change within my lifetime. It is perhaps the only amusement that has maintained its physical integrity through many years. Take the slap-stick, the bladder, and the funny fall, and you have the clown's sole stock in trade for decades. Unless I am much mistaken, they will remain so for another hundred years.



“ EVERY CLOWN ACT MUST TELL A STORY.”

Some very successful clown tricks are mere accidents. You start out to do an act, stump your toe or slip up. Then everybody laughs, for they think it is part of the show. Thereafter, every time you go out to do this act you stump your toe or slip up. With all these aids, some men work for years at clowning, and never become clowns. Good clowns are born, not made.

The clown's costume requires much thought and study. Although most clowns look alike to you, if you will watch their attire carefully you will see that each one is slightly different from the other. I have little patience with the many contrivances that some modern clowns use, such as guns, electrical appliances, and all that sort of thing. To be a real clown you only need your wits and a few simple things. The dullard clown seeks to make up for

his mental deficiencies with mechanical contrivances. Perhaps I am prejudiced in favor of the old ways, just as I cling to the memory of the old days. But they are the best.

V

I LEARN ABOUT LIFE

I HAVE rambled along, talking about my profession and the things that have happened in it, until now I realize that I have not touched upon some events which meant a good deal to me personally. A clown, despite the general impression, is a real human being. He has emotions like any other mortal, and sometimes they are deeper and truer than in those who pretend to piety and keep a straight face.

Although we are nomads, we people of the circus have hearts. It was shortly after I came to America that I first saw the woman who was to play, for a time, such an important part in my life. I had just

joined the Burr Robbins show, and I was a struggling young clown in a strange land. I did not even know all the people in the show. My life had been so hard and fast that I had had no time to think of romance.

One day as I walked from the pad room to the entrance to the main tent, waiting for my time to go on, I saw a young woman in tights and ruffled skirts, standing with a whip in her hand. She, too, was waiting her turn. She was lithe, slender, and graceful, and she had the most wonderful eyes I had ever seen. Something rose in my throat and a keen, swift feeling ran through me. I had never anywhere beheld anyone who had impressed me in just that way. As she stood there, full of life and animation, the very embodiment of grace and beauty, I realized that she wielded a fascination for me that was irre-

sistible. I watched her as she made her entry. When she walked she was the very poetry of motion; her bow to the crowd was airy, and when she leaped to the back of a noble white horse, she seemed like a bird. I stood at the entrance transfixed. She seemed the most exquisite rider I had ever seen. I forgot my cue, and one of my fellow-clowns had to shake me by the shoulder and say:

“Wake up, Jules.”

That afternoon I stumbled through my work. I was so slow that the ringmaster touched me up with his whip. I could not keep my eyes off that rider. When she was in the ring the whole tent seemed to be flooded with sunshine, and when she left it, amid a tumult of applause, it seemed bare and desolate.

Day after day I watched her in silent admiration. Once I picked up courage to

speak to her. The informality of circus life requires no introductions among its people. She seemed to be very proud and haughty, and treated my advance with disdain. Yet I always made it a point to be at the entrance when she went on, and I watched for her when she came out. While she was in the ring I could scarcely work.

I never realized how deeply I cared for her until I saw her talking to the head of our principal trapeze family. He was a splendid-looking Frenchman, with brown hair and curled mustache, and he had a dashing air. He got a big salary, was featured in all the bills, and quite naturally my lady smiled upon him. But I loved on in silence, and in pain, covering it all with the clown's fool garb.

Can you imagine how I felt as I stood apart each day, watching this glorious creature laughing and making merry with

a handsome rival? It was just like a scene in a French book that I had read when I was a boy at the Circus Francisco in Paris. I little dreamed then that it would happen to me.

One day I gave her some flowers that I had bought on a hot, dusty trip downtown. She accepted them with a sort of condescension, and then turned quickly away, for the French acrobat happened along, and she beamed on him.

This ordeal was not pleasant. It got on my nerves, and interfered with my work. I had always been sunny and smiling, and my unfailing good cheer had often helped to drive care away from my colleagues. I grew sad and irritable.

"What's the matter, Jules?" they all said.

"He must be in love," said the contortionist, banteringly.

Full many a jest is spoken in earnest, and I realized it that day. All the while we were traveling in the South. The weather was very hot and there had been a good deal of rain. Often the lot on which we showed was damp. I caught cold, fever developed, and I had to go to bed. But I stayed with the show. As I lay in my berth I dreamed, as all young lovers dream, that some day this beautiful bareback rider, hearing of my illness, would come to see me on our car; that she would lean over me with a wondrous smile on her face and say:

“Jules, forgive me. I have cared for you always, and now I shall never leave you again.”

One night, when I dreamed this very vividly, I woke with a start to find the moon shining in my face, and the car rattling over a long bridge. I was alone.

I got well, and took up my clowning

again. The first day I was back in harness I went to my accustomed place, where so often I had seen the bareback lady. My heart was in my eyes, and they looked for one thing. But I did not see her. I went on for my first turn, with my mind all in a whirl. When I got back to the dressing-room I asked the boss clown about her.

"Humph," he said, and shrugged his shoulders. "That woman?"

"Yes?" I replied, growing indignant.

"The less you ask about her the better," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Simply this," he replied, "at Shreveport, last week, she skipped the show, and eloped with the hotel manager. She has a husband and two kids in Canada." After a pause he added:

"Good riddance, I guess."

It was a great shock to me. It seemed as if the ground had been cut away from my feet. I felt a pain in my heart, and stumbled over to my trunk and sat down. My temple of romance had come toppling down. I had been terribly disillusioned. But I said to myself:

“Brace up, Jules. There are plenty of other women in the world.” And I braced up.

I must say right here, in defense of the women of the circus, that the type I have just described is a very rare one. The women who work under the canvas are brave, loyal, and moral. Inured to physical hardship, and accustomed to meet all kinds of emergencies, they well know how to combat life's cares. They are the gentlest of wives, the tenderest of mothers, and the best of comrades.

That early sentimental experience made

a slight impress on me, I am glad to say. I was young and full of life. Some years later, when I was playing in a winter show in the West, I met a strong and noble woman. We became great friends. She was not of the circus, but had many friends in the profession. The next year I went back and married her. She has been my mate ever since, and each winter I go back to her to find a tender welcome and a heart filled with affection. Were it not for her I might to-day be a wanderer on the face of the earth.

They say a clown is a jester and has no soul. I will tell you of an incident in my own life. One of the joys that my home had given me was a little boy. I was away with the circus when he came into the world, and I recall how impatient I was for the end of the season to come, so I could go to him. We became great pals,

this little chap and I. I called him Jules, and I wanted him to be a great circus performer. I had to be away from him all summer, but in November, when the show went into winter quarters at Baraboo, I hurried back to him. The family lived in New York then. I watched his little muscles develop. I would dress up in my clown clothes for him, go through all my stunts, and he had enchanted hours. He was the delight of my life.

One year the show opened very early. We were playing in a small Wisconsin town. It was a one-night stand, and the big tent was full. I had a brand-new act, and it was very funny. In it I carried a rag baby around in my arms. I was supposed to be taking it away from the nurse. After I had been out on the track for a little while, a clown came up and told me I was wanted in the pad room. When I got

there I was handed a telegram from my wife. It read:

“Jules is dying.”

He was in New York; I was hundreds of miles away, and I could not go to him. The dearest thing in all the world to me was slipping away. Outside in the big tent the band was playing; whips were cracking; people were laughing; the whole circus fun was on. There I stood in fool's garb, with the hot tears streaming down my make-up. I heard a voice say merrily:

“Come, Jules, we're waiting for you.”

So I had to' go out into that crowded arena with a breaking heart, and disport myself that the mob might laugh—playing with a dummy child while my own lay dying.

Can you wonder, then, that behind the jest of the clown there is often the pang of pain, the sear of sorrow? I have many

chances to look into the heart of the circus, because I am the postman. I go down to the post-office in every town, and I bring out the mail. I know every performer by name, and I am the agent that brings joy or ache. Many eager hopes hang on those post-office trips of mine. The dashing bare-back ladies and the daring trapeze performers look for letters that never come. Human nature is the same the world over, whether it is in the gilded palace or under the canvas of the big tent.

I send away the money orders for all the performers, and in this way I find out some of their secrets. The gruff strong man, whose giant muscles are the admiration of the crowd, sends part of his wages each week to his old mother in Germany; the bewildering little rider, who moves in a gay world of motion and color, has a sick husband, whom she supports. I become the



" I BECAME THE FRIEND AND CONFIDANT OF ALL."

friend and confidant of all of them, and it makes life richer and deeper and more worth while for me.

I have seen many things in my circus day to wring the heart. I told you of my own great sorrow. It reminds me of a sort of kindred grief that came to my old friend Garrett. He was one of the best fellows that ever lived, an Irishman of the real sort, and a good clown. Many a time we worked together in the sawdust. He married a very pretty slack-wire performer, named Dottie. She was a very lovable little thing, and everybody in the circus liked her. One night Garrett and I were working on the track, and Dottie had gone up for her act. We made merry as we went, and kept the crowd in a roar of laughter.

All of a sudden I heard a scream, but kept right on with my work. It is part of

the unwritten rule of circus business to ignore fear and panic. So we kept on. But a curious hush fell on the crowd. I turned, and there on the middle stage I saw a group standing about a huddled figure. A man came rushing from the pad room, and I saw it was our doctor. By that time Garrett had turned, too. I saw his face turn ghastly, even under the white make-up. He gave a moan, and dashed over to the platform. There he found his wife dead. She had fallen from the wire and there was no net beneath.

Gently he picked her up, and carried her away, sobbing out his heart over her tinsel dress. But in a moment the music struck up, the whips cracked, and the circus was going again.

VI

I RELATE SOME CLOWN HISTORY

MANY people think that because the clown wears a grotesque garb and indulges in silly antics, that he is a buffoon all the time. They are very much mistaken. Like humorists, we take our profession very seriously, for it has traditions of real greatness.

I never quite understood this so much until I had an experience in Boston. We usually stay there a week, and this gives us a chance to get around and see the city. One hot June afternoon I was taking a street-car ride out towards the suburbs. It was so sultry that few people were stirring. For a time I had the car all to myself.

Then a very dignified old gentleman came aboard and sat down next to me. We rode on in silence for a time until I made some remark about the weather. I am inclined to be friendly. We got to talking. Finally he asked me what my business was.

“I am a circus clown,” I replied.

He looked amazed. Then wiped his glasses, gazed at me, and remarked:

“It’s extraordinary. I thought you were a minister.”

Perhaps the white string necktie that I always wear fooled him, as it has fooled many other people. They seem to think that a clown should be grinning all the time or ready to turn a somersault.

I found the old gentleman very entertaining. He said a little later on:

“My friend, your profession is a thousand years old, and you may well be proud of it.”

This interested me immensely, and I asked him to tell me where I could find out some facts about its origin.

“If you will read your Roman history you will find much to enlighten you about the beginning of your work.” Then he told me that he was a professor at Harvard, and soon after he left the car.

The next day I went down to the Boston Public Library and got some Roman histories. Although I found nothing about clowns, there was a great deal about pantomime, which I have always held was the real forerunner of clowning. Pantomime dates back to the Jews and early Egyptians. The early Greek drama partook of it, and it was introduced into Rome during the reign of the Emperor Augustus. Mæcenas, Virgil, Horace, and Ovid, and other great literary men of the period, enjoyed the work of the pantomimists. The

early pantomimes, so I discovered, expressed love or the exploits of the gods and goddesses. At one time the Romans went mad on the subject of pantomimes. Nero was one of the most ardent patrons. When he asked Demetrius what gift he most wanted, that worthy answered:

“A pantomime, because it needs no interpreter.”

The pantomimist spoke a universal language, because he talked with his hands. The Roman pantomimist worked in the great open-air theaters, and also in the homes of the rich. In the latter places he was called upon to carve the meats, which he did with many flourishes. Thus he made himself both useful and ornamental. In later years, however, I might add that the clown has lost his ornamental features. The Roman pantomime died with the decay of Roman glory, and it was not until



"TO BE A GOOD CLOWN A MAN MUST BE A STUDENT AND IN EARNEST."

the fifteenth century that it was revived in Italy.

Then it was that the original predecessor of the clown of to-day made his appearance in rude plays in the character known as Arlecchino, who was a blundering servant. Originally he combined loutishness with great cunning. Out of this name developed the word Harlequin, which became very popular in France. The Harlequin wore a black mask, had a cocked hat, and wielded a bat. This bat was the original of the modern slapstick so much used by clowns and low comedians.

As the pantomime developed, Harlequin surrounded himself with characters. Of course there had to be a woman, so she was introduced in the shape of a pretty servant, who wore tights. She was Colombine. The girl had to have a father, so he became Pantaloon, who wore baggy trousers. A

fourth figure was also needed. Here is where the first real clown came in. He was the servant to Harlequin. He, too, wore baggy trousers, had a peaked hat, and was supposed to be always getting into trouble. You can now see the connection between Harlequin's clown and the circus clown of to-day.

Pantomime found its greatest vogue in England, where it was introduced early in the eighteenth century at the Covent Garden Theater. A manager named Rich first brought it out. He devised a pantomime play in which Harlequin appeared as the lover of Colombine. Her father (Pantaloön) opposed the match; thereupon Harlequin abducted her, with the aid of the clown. The clown introduced many ludicrous effects.

The pantomime plays grew into tremendous popularity in England. They

were given at the holiday season before immense crowds. The greatest managers found them necessary to good business. Even Garrick became sponsor for it. It was he who introduced Signor Giuseppe Grimaldi, father of the "Immortal Joe," the greatest clown the world has ever known. I am proud to belong to the profession that Grimaldi adorned. The father played Harlequin for a long time in the London pantomimes. Joe early appeared with his parent. His first part was as monkey, when he was three years old. He was attached to a chain, and his father used to whirl him around by this chain. Once the chain broke, and little Joe landed on the stomach of a stout gentleman who sat in the front row.

When Joe grew up he abandoned the Harlequin part, and became the clown. He took off the spangles and fancy colored

diamonds that were always a part of the Harlequin costume, and dressed in white with pantaloon trousers. He whitened his face, and then put on patches of red. He looked more like a lubberly boy, who had been caught eating jam.

With the ascendancy of Joe Grimaldi the clown took precedence over Harlequin, and has had it ever since. But it was due to Joe's great genius. He was called "The Garrick of Clowns." His first triumphs were in "Mother Goose." He did not depend upon acrobatic feats for his success, but on genuine humor. His antics were side-splitting. He became a national figure. Lord Byron was his friend, and Charles Dickens used to come to see him each week. Later, Dickens edited his *Memoirs*, which I regard as a remarkable tribute to a clown's thoughts. When Grimaldi was out of the cast all London

sulked. He was as necessary to Covent Garden as was the great John Kemble himself. Yet he was only a clown.

It is said of Grimaldi that he felt his work so keenly that as soon as his performance was over, he retired to a corner and wept profusely. He was a man of tender heart and generous impulses. There is a story about him which has been handed down by many generations of clowns. It goes on to say that once Grimaldi became very ill and despondent. He went to consult a great London specialist. The great man looked him over, and then remarked:

“Go to see Grimaldi, and laugh yourself well.”

The clown looked at him sadly, and replied:

“I am Grimaldi.”

The art of exquisite clown fooling died in England when Grimaldi passed away.

The London managers had to create a substitute, which they did after a fashion, with elaborate scenic spectacles. The clowns that followed were acrobats. Agility took the place of humor. There are traces of this in the clowning of to-day.

Of course, in any consideration of the origin of the modern clown you must reckon with the king's jester. You have only to turn to the pages of Shakespeare to find how highly he was regarded. Every court had its fool, and he was often the wise man. In King Lear are the words:

"Jesters do oft prove prophets."

Jacques was a philosopher, and Touchstone a great personage.

I have known king's jesters in the American circus, but their art was too fine to be appreciated by the multitudes, and they

had to give way to the more popular form of clowning. It took years of thought and study to be a Shakespearian jester.

Although the historical facts about the origin of the clown are fine and imposing, I somehow prefer to remember the legend about it that I heard as a boy in France. It was told me by an old clown in Normandy. As he related it to me, it went on to show that the little daughter of a wandering mountebank once dreamed that she saw her father with whitened face, peaked hat, and baggy white pantaloons, performing before a great crowd, and that everybody was laughing and applauding. It was such a vivid dream that she told her father about it. He was deeply impressed, and adopted the costume, thus appearing as the first white-faced clown.

VII

I GIVE MY CREED

FOR thousands of years man has searched for the Fountain of Youth, and it has always eluded him. Yet I am foolish enough to think that I have discovered it. The secret lies in being a clown. We are not only the oldest people of the circus in tradition, but also in years. There is that about our work which keeps us eternally young in spirit. Sometimes when the journey has been long and the day hot and the dust thick, I get a little weary, for I am moving on towards sixty. But as soon as I hear the music of the band, the snorts of the horses, the shrill voices of the

“barkers,” and the indescribable movement of the crowd toward the big tent, it all acts like wine upon my blood. I am stirred to action, the weariness falls away like magic, and I am young again. I have not missed a performance in five years.

Many performers in the circus have this same experience, but the clown has a deeper and truer inspiration behind his. It lies in laughter. We make people laugh and we get, in a curious way, the effect of that laughter on ourselves. Laughter looses the fetters of the brain, and it radiates a spirit that makes for the joyousness of life. Combined with it is our constant action in the open air. No man who keeps his body and mind active, and who lives temperately in the fresh air, will grow “old” as the world sees age. This is why I say that I have found the Fountain of Youth.

Perhaps by this time you may wonder what a clown's state of mind is. If I have succeeded in giving any hint of the real mood of my profession, you will know that it is seriousness. Hence the clown's outlook on life is grave. It takes a wise man to be a fool. Therefore anybody cannot play the clown. It is only in external things that we are "comical fellows." There are good and bad clowns, clowns with high ideals, and those who regard clowning merely as a means towards earning a livelihood. Of course, clowns, like poets, must be fed, but there is a right way to approach one's calling and a wrong way. To be a good clown a man must be a student and be in earnest.

I read books every chance I get. It will not surprise you perhaps when I say that one of my favorites is "Don Quixote." Somewhere in this great work Sancho Panza says:

“In comedy the most difficult character is that of the fool, and he that plays the part must be no simpleton.”

Wise old Sancho was right. It fits into my theory of clowning perfectly.

I have read every one of Charles Dickens' books. This is not because the Immortal Boz was the friend and editor of Grimaldi, the king of clowns, but because it always seems to me that he knew how to analyze the human heart. He knew the lowly. I like history, too, and once in a while, when I want to be stirred deeply, I read about Napoleon. I think he was a very wicked man, but I have French blood in me, and I suppose it is pride in him, after all, that makes me admire him. I have left for the last the book that has influenced me more than all others, and this is the Bible. The world never associates a white-faced clown with piety. I don't profess to be pious, but

I love to read the Bible. Sometimes on the long, hot Sunday afternoons I lie under a tent flap and read it to the men. The roughest canvas man will respect a man who is sincerely good, but he has a profound contempt for the pretender.

Since I have gotten into a reflective mood I should like to say something about the work of a clown that I don't think the average person who goes to the circus comprehends, and it is this: the clown's art has endured through all the years because it is clean. This is a very simple but a very powerful reason. Amusement vogues come and go, for the taste of the man who wants to be diverted is fickle. He is always craving something new. He may be interested for a brief time in the sickly atmosphere of a problem or an erotic play, but he soon tires of it. So with many other forms of entertainment. The vaudeville which is now hav-



“ I HAVE MADE COUNTLESS CHILDREN CLAP THEIR LITTLE
HANDS WITH GLEE.”

ing its hour of glory will pass away. But clowning is done out in the open air, where the winds of heaven blow about you! It is clean, morally and physically. It has no ambition to appeal to the senses; it has no elevating purpose; its sole idea is to amuse. In this it has achieved permanency.

Perhaps nothing in all my long antic before the public has given me a keener pleasure than the realization that I have given delight to children. The sight of their little faces, beaming with happiness and stretching up, row behind row, to the very top of the seats, has always filled me with renewed zeal for my work.

Nothing so attracts the small boy as the circus. I have strained my conscience many a time by letting a ragged urchin slip under the canvas and get a seat in the cherished

paradise. This reminds me of an incident that always gives me satisfaction to rehearse.

Eighteen years ago the Ringling show was at Binghamton, N. Y. It was a very hot day, and I stood outside the dressing tent to get a breath of air. As I stood there a little boy came up and eyed me eagerly. I was dressed for the afternoon performance, and thought he was merely staring at me out of boyish curiosity. Then I saw tears and a very wistful look in his eyes. I have always loved children, and this little chap made me think of my own dead boy. I walked up to him, and putting my hand on his head, said:

“What’s the matter, sonny?”

“I want to see the circus,” he replied.

“Have you no money?” I asked.

“No,” he replied, and fell to weeping.

Something in the lad's manner touched me deeply. I saw that he really wanted to see the show, so I took him by the hand and led him to where he could find his way to a good seat. He was radiant with pleasure as I left him.

The years passed, and I forgot all about the incident. A few seasons ago we again showed at Binghamton, N. Y. Once more it was a scorching hot afternoon, and curiously enough I stood outside the dressing tent before the time came for me to go on. A fine-looking young man came up to where I was standing, and said:

"I beg your pardon, but I am looking for a clown who befriended me fifteen years ago. I heard someone then call him 'Jules.' Can you tell me if he is still with the show?"

I said to him:

“ You don’t have to look far, for I am Jules.”

With that he reached forward, seized my hand and shook it warmly. Then he said:

“ I have waited a long time to thank you for that kindness of long ago. It may have seemed a small thing to you, but it meant a lot to me. I want you to take dinner with me to-night.”

I went downtown with him after the performance, and we had a fine talk. He had become an electrical engineer and was doing well. He had always missed our circus when it showed at Binghamton. He made me promise to send him a picture of myself.

My life is dotted with experiences of this kind. Can you wonder, then, that I am proud and glad to be a clown? In one of his plays Shakespeare says:

"It is meat and drink to see a clown."

I should change it so as to read:

"It is meat and drink TO BE a clown."

I have saved my money, and I own a house out in a Missouri town, where I go every winter after the circus season closes. I also have a farm in North Dakota, where I can see green things grow. I know that whatever may befall me I have a roof of my own which will shelter my last years. But I never expect to stop clowning as long as I am able to work.

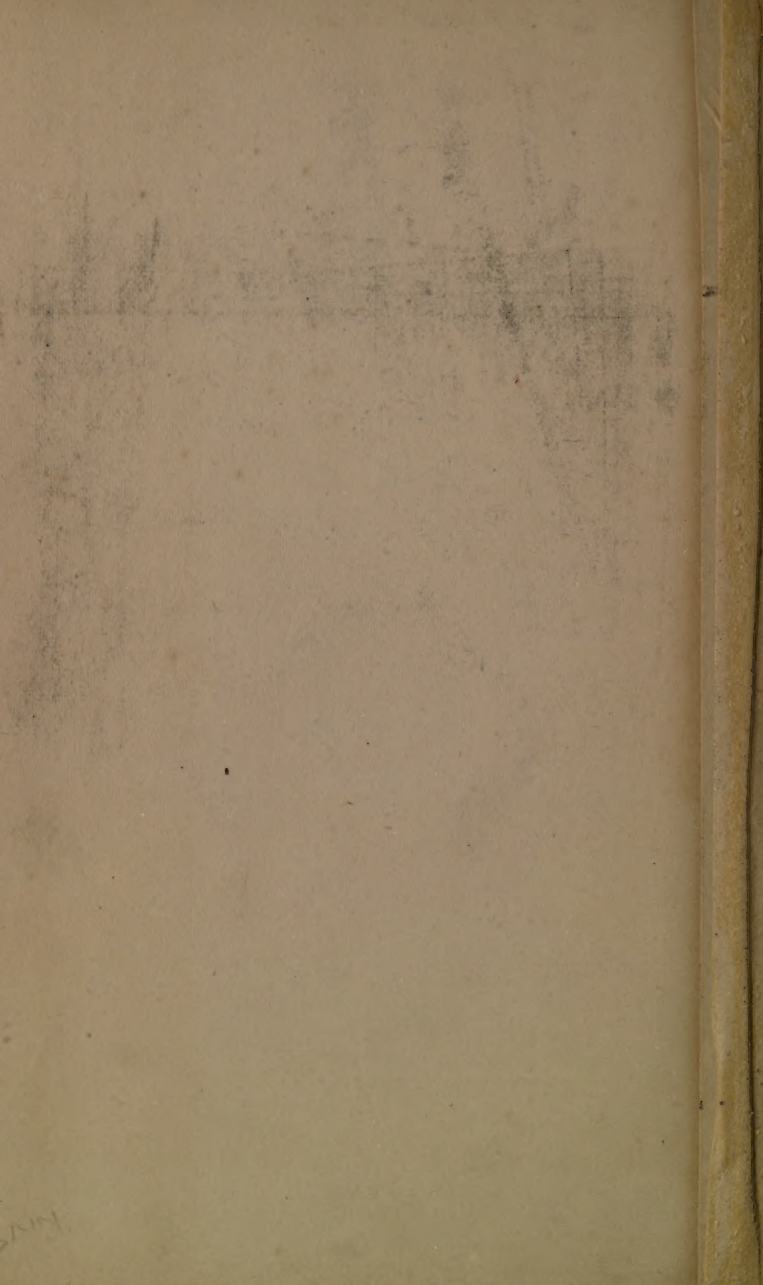
Since I have spoken of the origin of the clown it might be well for me to speak of his end. Few ever leave the circus. Once a clown, always a clown. It is best to die in harness.

I have enjoyed my clowning, and to be content with one's work is a great satisfac-

tion. It does not come to all. I know at least that I have caused many people to forget their troubles, and I have made countless children clap their little hands with glee.

It is good to be a clown.

THE END



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Marcosson, Isaac Frederick
The autobiography of a
clown

